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ABSTRACT

Understanding characteristics of teens' sexual relationships may help us to better understand how to reduce teens' risk of early unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), as well as the psychological and emotional problems that may be associated with teenage romantic relationships and sexual activity. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, this brief presents information that is relationship-specific because sexual experiences may be unique within different relationships. To increase the understanding of differences in sexual experiences among teens, the brief also examines relationship experiences, partner characteristics, and contraceptive use patterns separately by gender, race and ethnicity, age at first sex, and relationship type. These analyses have produced some important, and often troubling, findings. On the positive side, most teens consider their first sexual relationships to be more than casual flings: they view these relationships as romantic in nature. In addition, the majority of teens discuss contraception with their partner before they first have sex. On the negative side, an alarming proportion of teens experience some type of physical or verbal abuse within their first sexual relationships, they initiate sex very early in these relationships, and some teens never use contraception. An implication of the research presented in this brief is that parents, educators, and service providers who have a greater knowledge of adolescent relationship dynamics may be in a better position to help teenagers make more responsible decisions about sex and avoid many of the risks associated with it. (Contains 25 references and 9 figures.) (GCP)

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The First Time: Characteristics of Teens' First Sexual Relationships

by
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Jennifer Manlove
Kerry Franzetta

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The First Time: Characteristics of Teens' First Sexual Relationships

By Suzanne Ryan, Ph.D., Jennifer Manlove, Ph.D., and Kerry Franzetta August 2003

Overview *Even as teens are bombarded with sexually provocative music, videos, fashions, advertisements, and images of pop stars who flaunt their sexuality, the consensus of society still seems to be that it's not good for school-age teens to have sex. Many teens, in fact, have opted for abstinence, but many others have not. Indeed, recent data show that almost half of school-age teens in the United States report that they have had sexual intercourse.[1] At the same time, teen births have dropped to an all-time low.*

While extensive attention has focused on teens' transitions to first experience of sexual intercourse, *little available information exists on teens' first sexual* relationships. *Understanding characteristics of teens' sexual relationships may help us to better understand how to reduce teens' risk of early unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), as well as the psychological and emotional problems that may be associated with teenage romantic relationships and sexual activity.[2-4]*

Many teens feel they are not ready to start having sex and act accordingly, but this Research Brief *provides a fresh picture of teens aged 12 to 18 who do report a first sexual relationship. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which interviewed teens across the nation in 1995 and 1996 (see box on page 2),[5] this brief presents information that is* relationship-specific *because sexual experiences may be unique within different relationships.[6-10] To increase our understanding of differences in sexual experiences among teens, the brief also examines relationship experiences, partner characteristics, and contraceptive use patterns separately by gender, race and ethnicity, age at first sex, and relationship type.*

These analyses have produced some important, and often troubling, findings. On the positive side, we found that most teens consider their first sexual relationships to be more than casual flings: they view these relationships as romantic in nature. In addition, the majority of teens discuss contraception with their partner before they first have sex. On the negative side, we found that an alarming proportion of teens experience some type of physical or verbal abuse within their first sexual relationships, that they initiate sex very early in these relationships, and that some teens never use contraception. The findings identify young teens and Hispanic teens as subgroups with particularly high chances of engaging in these riskier interactions.

An implication of the research presented in this brief is that parents, educators, and service providers who have a greater knowledge of adolescent relationship dynamics may be in a better position to help teenagers make more responsible decisions about sex and avoid many of the risks associated with it.

The Relationship and the Partner

This section considers teens' first sexual relationships from several perspectives: how teens define their relationships, the types of partners they choose, how long their relationships last, and the quality of these relationships (including whether or not they involve violence). Findings are presented below.

The majority of teens' first sexual relationships were with a romantic partner. Eighty-five percent of teens viewed the relationship with their first sexual partner as romantic in nature, while the remaining 15 percent did not report a romantic connection with their partner (see Figure 1). Teen boys were less likely than teen girls to describe a relationship as romantic. Seventy-nine percent of teen boys self-described their first sexual relationship as romantic, compared with 89 percent of teen girls.

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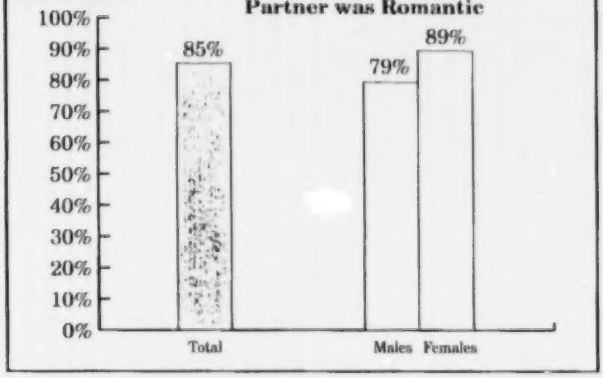
About the Research Source for This Brief

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) is designed to provide a broad understanding of the health and well-being of a nationally representative sample of adolescents who were in grades seven through 12 in the United States in 1995. More than 14,000 teens participated in interviews in both 1995 and 1996, completing detailed surveys that included information on romantic and sexual relationships. To learn more about the characteristics of teens' first sexual relationships, Child Trends analyzed data from a sample of 1,909 adolescents who first had sexual intercourse in the 12 months before being interviewed in 1995 or in the months between their 1995 and 1996 interviews.[11] In this brief, we have separated self-nominated romantic relationships from non-romantic relationships and "liked" relationships (not self-defined as romantic, but in which respondents had held hands with, kissed, and told their partner they liked or loved them). Figures 3 and 6 include romantic and "liked" partners.

FIGURE 1

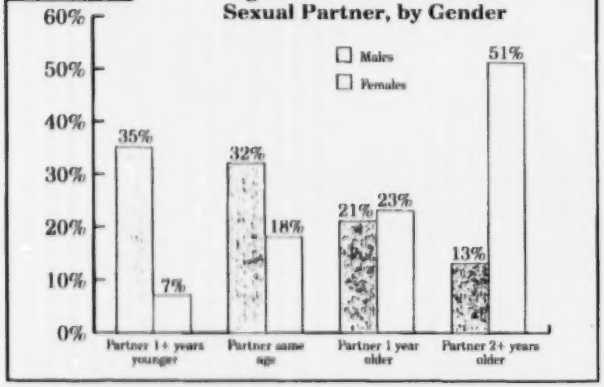
Percentage Whose First Sexual Partner was Romantic



Teen girls were more likely than teen boys to have an older first sexual partner. The average age difference between a teen and his or her first sexual partner was approximately one year. Teen girls were, on average, 1.7 years younger than their partners, compared with teen boys who were approximately one and one-half months older than their partners. More than half of teen girls (51 percent) had a first sexual partner who was two or more years older, and 23 percent had a partner who was one year older (see Figure 2). Almost one in five teenage girls (19 percent) had a partner who was considerably older – by four or more years. In contrast, 13 percent of teen boys had a partner who was at least two years older, and 21 percent had a partner who was one year older. Younger partners were more common for teen boys, with 35 percent having a sexual partner at least one year younger (while 25 percent had a partner at least two years younger) and 32 percent having a partner of the same age. It was rare for a teen girl to have a first sexual partner younger than herself – only seven percent fell into this category.

FIGURE 2

Age Difference with First Sexual Partner, by Gender



Age difference between partners is related to age of sexual initiation. Teens who were younger when they became involved in a sexual relationship were more likely to have an older sexual partner than teens who delayed having sex for the first time until a later age. Fifty percent of teens aged 14 or younger when they first had sex had a sexual partner who was two or more years older, compared with 23 percent of teens who delayed having sex for the first time until they were at least 17. The patterns are different for teen boys and girls, with young girls being more likely to become involved with substantially older first sexual partners. Among teen girls who first had sex before age 14, 65 percent had a partner at least two years older (25 percent had a partner at least four years older), but among teen boys who were sexually experienced by age 14, only 17 percent had a partner two or more years their senior. In many states, relationships in which teens have sex at an early age and/or have sex with much older partners are legally considered to be instances of statutory rape.[12]

The majority of sexually experienced teens in romantic relationships initiated sexual intercourse within the first three months of the relationship. Among sexually experienced teens, more than half (61 percent) began having sexual intercourse within three months of the start of their romantic relationship (see Figure 3), although the average waiting time until sex was five months. The majority of teens who had sex either reported that they waited less than one month before having sex with their partner (24 percent), or that they waited only one to three

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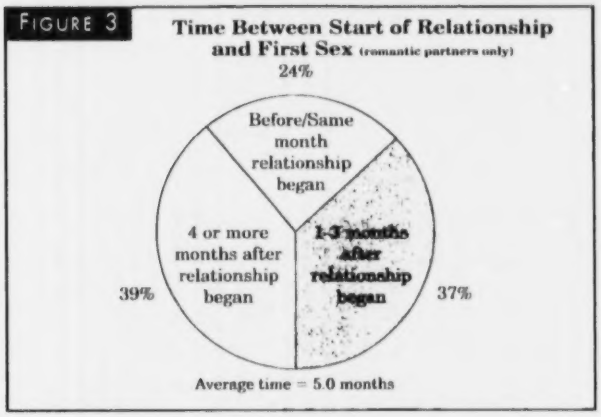


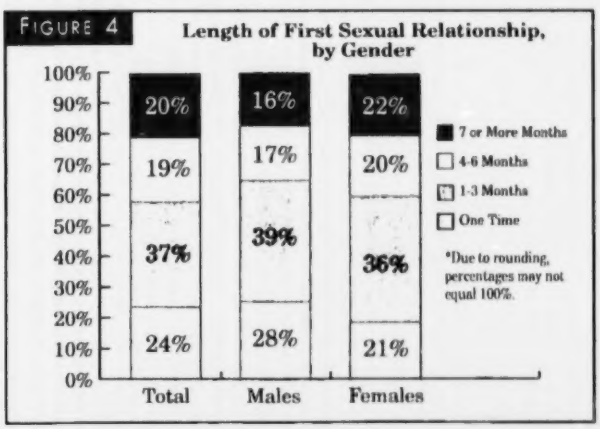
FIGURE 3
Time Between Start of Relationship and First Sex (romantic partners only)
24%
Before/Same month relationship began
4 or more months after relationship began
39%
1-3 months after relationship began
37%
Average time = 5.0 months

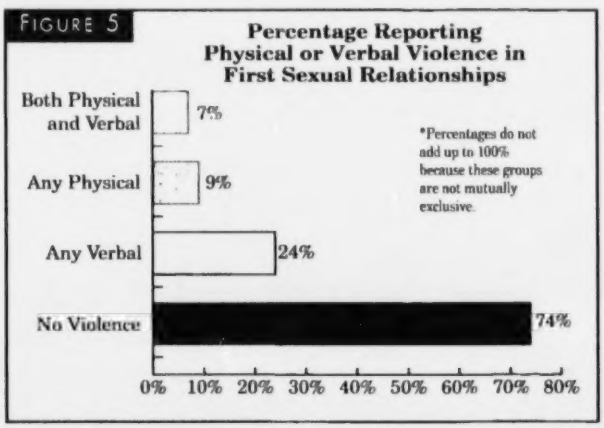
months before having sexual intercourse with their partner (37 percent). The remaining 39 percent delayed having sexual intercourse with their partner until the relationship had lasted for at least four months, and one-third of these teens waited for at least a year before having sex. The length of teens' pre-sexual romantic relationships was similar for teen girls and boys as well as all racial, ethnic, and age groups. Note that there are teens in romantic relationships who never have sex or who wait for extended periods of time before having sex, but the focus of this *Research Brief* is on those who *have* had sex.

On average, teens' first sexual relationships lasted for almost six months. The length of the sexual relationship measures the time between the first and last occurrence of sexual intercourse. The date of first having sex does not necessarily correspond with the date the relationship began. As indicated in Figure 3, many relationships existed for several months before partners engaged in sexual intercourse. Sometimes when teens finally did have sex with these partners, they did not do so again. A significant proportion of teens – 24 percent – had sex with their first partner only once (see Figure 4). While some of these one-time occurrences likely constitute a teenage version of the casual "one-night stand," others may reflect teens who dated their partner for a while, had sex one time, and then decided that they weren't ready for a sexual relationship after all. In contrast, more than two-thirds (37 percent) of teens reported first sexual relationships that lasted for one to three months, 19 percent had four- to six- month relationships, and 20 percent had sexual relationships that lasted for at least seven months.

Length of sexual relationship varies by gender and relationship type. Among teens who had sex, girls were more likely to report longer-lasting sexual relationships than boys, an average of 6.3 months for girls *versus* 5.3 months for boys. Twenty-two percent of teen girls said their sexual relationships lasted for at least seven months, while 16 percent of teen boys reported relationships of that length (see Figure 4). Boys (28 percent) tended to have more one-time sexual relationships than girls (21 percent). These one-night stands were much less common for teens in romantic relationships (20 percent) than for teens who did not characterize their relationships as romantic (68 percent). In contrast, teens romantically involved with their partners were more likely to have relationships that lasted for at least seven months (22 percent) than were teens in non-romantic relationships (six percent).

A significant proportion of teens reported physical or verbal violence within their first sexual relationships. While the majority (74 percent) of teens' first sexual relationships did not involve violence, physical and/or verbal abuse did occur in some of these relationships. Nine percent of teens reported that their first sexual partner engaged in some form of physical violence, including pushing, shoving, or throwing objects that could hurt (see Figure 5). A higher proportion (24 percent) said that verbal abuse occurred (e.g., name-calling, insults, swearing, disrespectful





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treatment in front of others, or threats of violence). Seven percent of teens reported incidents of *both* verbal and physical violence during the relationship.

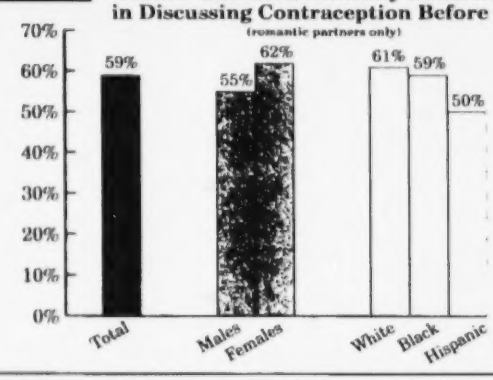
The likelihood of violence varies by racial and ethnic group and by relationship type. Important racial and ethnic differences exist in the prevalence of violence in these relationships, with Hispanics being the most likely to experience physical violence. Seventeen percent of Hispanic teens encountered physical violence in their first sexual relationships, compared with six percent of non-Hispanic whites and 12 percent of non-Hispanic blacks. Teens in romantic relationships were more likely to experience verbal abuse (25 percent) than were their peers who did not define their relationships as romantic (nine percent). This counterintuitive finding may be due to the fact that romantic sexual relationships generally last for a longer period of time, thus increasing the period of risk during which abuse might occur.

THE USE(OR NON-USE) OF CONTRACEPTION

Previous research has shown that teens' choice of sexual partners and the type of sexual relationships they have with these partners will influence teens' contraceptive use and consistency, and will subsequently influence their risk of unintended pregnancy and STDs.[11] In light of this research, examining issues of contraception within relationships becomes especially important. The following section reports on patterns of contraceptive use within teens' first sexual relationships.

Strong gender and racial and ethnic differences exist in discussing contraception before first sexual intercourse. Although contraception is an extremely important issue for sexually active teens to consider, less than two-thirds (59 percent) said they discussed the use of contraception with their partners before having sex for the first time (see Figure 6). Teen boys (55 percent) were less likely than teen girls (62 percent) to say they had had a conversation with their partner about contraception prior to the first sexual experience. Comparing racial and ethnic groups, Hispanics were the least likely to say they discussed contraception with their partners before having sex for the first time. Half of Hispanic teens said they had such a conversation – a significantly smaller proportion than their non-Hispanic white (61 percent) and non-Hispanic black (59 percent) peers. Similar racial and ethnic patterns were found for both teen boys and teen girls, with Hispanic teen

FIGURE 6 **Gender and Race/Ethnicity Differences in Discussing Contraception Before Sex**

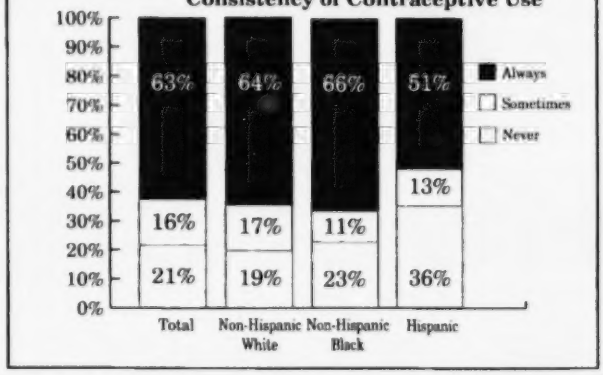


boys (43 percent) the *least* likely and white teen girls (63 percent) the *most* likely to say they talked about contraception with their partners.

More than one-fifth of teens never used contraception in their first sexual relationship. Consistent use of contraceptives is vital for preventing unintended pregnancy and STDs among sexually active teens. However, 21 percent of teens never used contraception during their first sexual relationship (see Figure 7). Moreover, 16 percent of teens who used contraception in their first sexual relationships did so inconsistently, using a method only occasionally. Inconsistent use (sometimes using contraception) is more likely, and non-use is less likely, in longer-lasting relationships. Less than two-thirds (63 percent) of teens used contraception *every* time that they had sexual intercourse.

Teens from different racial and ethnic backgrounds vary in consistency of contraceptive use. Hispanics, in particular, were less vigilant users of contraceptives, with more than one-third (36 percent) never using contraception during their first sexual relationship, compared with 23 percent of non-Hispanic blacks and 19 percent of non-Hispanic whites (see Figure 7).

FIGURE 7 **Race/Ethnicity Differences in Consistency of Contraceptive Use**



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Non-Hispanic whites and non-Hispanic blacks were more likely than Hispanics to be consistent users (64 percent and 66 percent, respectively, using contraception every time they had sex compared with 51 percent of Hispanics).

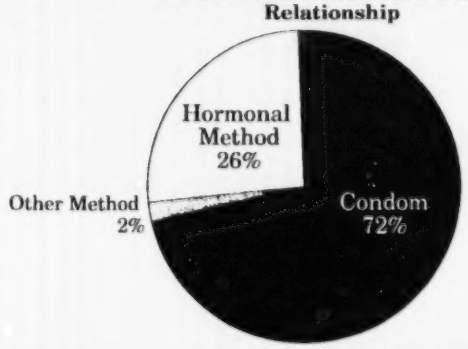
As teens delay sexual initiation until older ages, consistency of contraceptive use improves. Among teens who were aged 14 or younger during their first sexual relationship, 26 percent used no method of contraception. Among teens who were aged 17 or older when they first had sex, 18 percent never used contraception during their relationship. Seventy percent of teens in this oldest age group used contraception every time they had sex, compared with 58 percent of teens aged 14 or younger at their initial sexual experience.

Contraceptive consistency also varies by relationship type. Teens in romantic relationships were more likely than their counterparts to ever use contraception (80 percent *versus* 64 percent, respectively), but also more likely to be inconsistent users of it (17 percent *versus* six percent, respectively). As noted above, this finding may reflect the longer duration of romantic sexual relationships.

Among teens who used contraceptives, condoms were the predominant method. Seventy-two percent of teens who used contraception reported that the most effective method used during their first sexual relationship was a condom (see Figure 8). While helpful in preventing the transmission of STDs, condoms are not as effective in preventing pregnancy as hormonal contraceptive methods, which, on the other hand, do not provide any protection against STDs. One-quarter (26 percent) of teens used a hormonal method (including birth control pills, Norplant, Depo-Provera, IUD, and the contraceptive ring). The remaining two percent of adolescent contraceptive users chose an alternate method, such as withdrawal, rhythm, vaginal sponge, foam, jelly, cream, suppositories, diaphragm, or contraceptive film. Contraceptive method use was similar among gender, race and ethnicity, and age groups, and across relationship types.

FIGURE 8

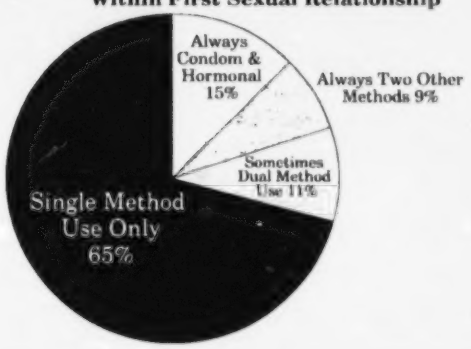
Most Effective Contraceptive Method Used Within First Sexual Relationship



One in three teens used dual contraceptive methods at some point in their first sexual relationship. Among teens who used contraception at least once during their first sexual relationships, approximately two-thirds (65 percent) relied on a single method only (see Figure 9). Almost one-quarter of teens always used two or more contraceptive methods simultaneously, with 15 percent using a combination of a condom with a hormonal method, and nine percent using some other combination. An additional 11 percent of teens reported occasional use of dual contraceptive methods. Similar levels of dual contraceptive use during the first sexual relationship were reported among teen boys and girls, all racial and ethnic groups, and by age and relationship type.

FIGURE 9

Dual Method Use and Consistency Within First Sexual Relationship



SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Although the media have focused on "hook-up" or "hangout" teen sexual relationships (i.e., those that lack emotional connection),[13] our research suggests that the vast majority of teens view their first sexual relationship as romantic. It's possible, however, that subsequent sexual relationships of teens may well include casual hookups.[8] After initiating sex, many of teens' relationships are very short-term, with eight out of 10 first sexual relationships lasting six months or less and a quarter of them being one-time occurrences. While this analysis doesn't examine whether teens go on to have additional sexual relationships, some of these one-time occurrences may happen among teens who decide that they are not ready yet to engage in responsible sexual behaviors and who decide to wait before having another sexual relationship.

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Some disturbing information about sexual partners and the quality of teens' first sexual relationships has emerged from our research. For example, one in four teens experiences some type of verbal or physical abuse from their first sexual partner, and 24 percent of teens first had sex with their partner in the same month that they started their romantic relationship, instead of waiting until their relationship was more established. In fact, the majority of sexually experienced teens reported having sex with their partner within three months of beginning their romantic or dating relationship. This relatively short time span provides a very small window of opportunity in which parents or service providers can intervene to encourage teens to delay initiating sex with that partner or to use contraception. The findings strongly suggest that early prevention efforts, prior to the initiation of romantic relationships, may be needed to help delay sex or increase consistent contraceptive use.

Our analyses also show that a substantial percentage of contraceptive users (more than one in three) use dual methods of contraception at least sometimes, and one-quarter use dual methods every time they use contraception. However, many teens – like adults – fail to use contraceptives consistently. Despite notable increases over time in condom use during the first sexual experience,[14] more than four in 10 teens did not discuss contraception with their partner before their first sexual experience. More than two in 10 teens never used contraception at all within their first sexual relationships, and face the potential consequences of unprotected sex, such as unintended pregnancy and STDs. In addition, many teens have regrets about their first sexual experience, and wish they had waited longer to have sex.[15]

The data on first sexual relationships also suggest that some teens engage in riskier sexual and contraceptive use behaviors in their first sexual relationships than others:

- **Younger teens.** Teens who are younger at the time of their first sexual experience, especially young girls, are more likely to report older first sexual partners. Younger teens are less consistent users of contraception; they are less likely to *ever* use a contraceptive method and less likely to *always* use a method than other teens. Younger teens are less likely to report using hormonal methods during their first sexual relationship. However, recent data show that almost one in five teens has had sexual intercourse before reaching age 15.[16] Thus, programs need to focus on delaying sex among younger teens and address the reproductive health needs of these very young sexually active teens.
- **Hispanic teens.** Hispanic teens are more likely to report some type of physical abuse from their first sexual partners than other racial and ethnic groups. Hispanic teens are also the least likely to discuss contraception with their partners before they have sexual intercourse, with Hispanic teen boys having an especially low likelihood of discussing contraceptive use. In addition, Hispanic teens are the least likely racial and ethnic group to use contraception consistently, with more than one in three reporting that they never used a contraceptive method within their first relationship. The increase in the Hispanic population in the United States, combined with the very high rates of teenage pregnancy and childbearing among Hispanics, suggests that they are an important target group for pregnancy prevention programs.[17,18] However, very few programs have been evaluated that are directed specifically towards Hispanic teens.[19]
- **Teen girls.** Teen girls, especially those who report the youngest ages at first sexual intercourse, often report that their partners are significantly older than they are. Other researchers suggest that these first sexual experiences among very young teen girls are sometimes coercive and are linked to poorer contraceptive use.[20] Teen girls also are more likely to have longer first sexual relationships, which makes it more difficult to maintain perfect contraceptive consistency. In addition, while teen girls are more likely than teen boys to discuss contraception with their first sexual partner, they are no more likely than boys to report consistent contraceptive use, dual method use, or hormonal method use.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The most obvious way to reduce adolescent pregnancy and STDs is to convince teens not to have sex at all. The "abstinence movement" embraces this approach. However, the high percentage of teens who are sexually active suggests that many teenagers ignore or fail to act upon abstinence messages, or that perhaps abstinence messages haven't been delivered effectively. Given these considerations, our research suggests a number of complementary approaches to help reduce the risks of adolescent pregnancy and STDs among teens:

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- Encouraging younger teens to delay sexual intercourse in order to reduce regret associated with too-early sex, improve contraceptive use, and reduce the number of lifetime sex partners as well as the risk of teen pregnancy and STDs.[21-23]
- Targeting program messages for teens to show that you can have serious romantic relationships without having sex and, for those who do choose to have sex, to encourage them to delay the initiation of sex within the relationship. Other research has shown that teens who are exclusively dating one partner are at a greater risk of early sexual involvement,[24] and our own research suggests that teens who delay having sex in their relationships are better users of contraceptives.[11]
- Encouraging sexually experienced teens to delay subsequent sexual activity. Many teens have short-term sexual relationships and may recognize that they are not ready for another sexual relationship.
- Emphasizing communication between teens and their sexual partners about contraceptive use and the importance of using contraception *every* time they engage in sexual activity.
- Targeting programs to meet the needs of Hispanic teens, who have especially low levels of contraceptive use.
- Fostering high-quality parent-teen relationships and encouraging parent-teen communication about sex and other topics, along with greater parental monitoring of teen behaviors. Many of these strategies have been shown to reduce risky sexual behaviors among teens.[25]

Conclusion

This *Research Brief* has focused on teens' first sexual *relationships* instead of first sexual *intercourse* because we recognize that sexual experiences don't occur in the abstract; they occur between particular people within particular relationships, and each of these relationships is unique. As with their older counterparts, teens make decisions about sexual activity and contraceptive use with each new relationship partner. Knowing more about the characteristics of these first sexual relationships can provide parents, educators, and service providers with a better understanding of the challenges they may face in helping teens' delay sexual activity, improve contraceptive use and consistency if they are sexually active, and avoid unintended childbearing and STDs, all of which dramatically improve teens' prospects in life.

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